

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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REP. BOB BISCHOFF'S STATEHOUSE REPORT

INDIANAPOLIS – After this week at the Legislature, I am very concerned that the riverboat revenues that have helped so many people in Southeast Indiana are at risk of being taken away.

At present, there are two plans alive in the Indiana General Assembly that are designed to take millions of dollars in riverboat revenue away from counties. Either plan would create substantial harm to the 68th House District, where we have been able to use these dollars to help our schools, infrastructure and public safety services.

One proposal approved in the House Ways and Means Committee would simply strip \$85 million in riverboat revenue from those counties that presently receive the funding. A second plan advocated by the Senate majority would take \$75 million in riverboat money away to help balance the state budget.

I believe these proposals would create huge problems for our area. In the past several years, we have seen riverboat funding used to help bring an Ivy Tech State College campus to Lawrenceburg, as well as improvements to local roads and bridges, and financial assistance for area schools. These are projects that have benefitted people all over southern Indiana, not just those who live and work in the 68th District.

In the remaining weeks of the 2005 session, I will be doing everything in my power to make sure these proposals are defeated. I will not stand by and watch officials from Indianapolis take funding that has been so helpful to our area away to fund such things as a new Colts stadium.

Over the past week, House members have debated and voted on a series of measures affecting our children. Discussions have focused on such things as ISTEP testing, kindergarten enrollment dates, moments of silence in our classrooms and even prevention of bullying.

I will talk about these issues in a minute, but it is fair to say that all of them pale next to the school funding debate that is now taking place in the state Senate. Members of the Senate Appropriations Committee have been considering changes to House Bill 1001, the biennial state budget plan authored by Indiana House Republicans.

As this session winds down to its final weeks, I remain hopeful that the Senate will be more supportive of our schools than the House Republicans, who supported a plan that will cut education funding as it raises local property taxes.

Early reports are not encouraging. While the Senate Republican plan provides a little more funding for schools, there are no minimum guarantees, which continues to raise the risk that local property taxes will have to be raised or programs will have to be cut and teachers laid off. The Senate Republican plan freezes state property tax relief, another move that will force local property tax increases.

I will continue to monitor the budget as it works its way through the Senate. Adequate education funding and property tax relief remain my top priorities.

In the House, representatives have devoted much of their time to issues concerning education. Here are several proposals that have received final approval.

Senate Bill 332 requires school corporations to provide a daily opportunity for students to voluntarily recite the Pledge of Allegiance, as well as a daily moment of silence. Any school corporation that is sued because of this law would be

defended by the Indiana Attorney General.

Senate Bill 231 would change the enrollment date for children attending kindergarten. A child who is five years of age by August 1 would be able to attend school that year. At present, a child must be five by July 1 in order to start going to kindergarten that year.

Senate Bill 200 would require all schoolchildren to enroll in the core 40 curriculum, but allow parents to opt out of the program. Core 40 offers a series of advanced courses in all subjects, with a concentration in math and sciences. I have serious concerns that this plan will add substantial costs to local school corporations at a time when school support is being cut at the state level.

Set for full House action is Senate Bill 371, which would move the state's ISTEP test from the fall to the spring, a change that is estimated to cost more than \$10 million. The merits of a switch are debatable – it is opposed by, among others, Superintendent of Public Instruction Suellen Reed – but I am not sure that we need to be discussing this kind of proposal at a time when school funding may be in short supply.

In the next several days, more major deadlines will pass for the 2005 session. House committee work on Senate bills will wrap up on Monday (April 4), and we must take final action on those bills by April 11. That will give us nearly three weeks to conduct House-Senate conference committees and resolve differences on this year's major issues.

Here are other highlights from the past week:

A proposal to mandate daylight-saving time in Indiana was revived this week in the House Public Policy Committee. If this plan becomes law this session, the clock change would become effective at 2 a.m. Sunday, June 5. I will talk more about this legislation in next week's Report.

House Democrats were able to make changes to Senate Bill 242 that will make it easier for people to comply with another proposal that will require people to provide a photo ID in order to vote. These changes will require license branches to be open on the day before and the day of elections in order to issue driver's licenses and state ID cards. Branches also will be open on extended hours on the Saturday after Election Day to give people who have voted on provisional ballots the chance to get proper photo ID.

Two Senate bills approved in the House offer some reorganization of state government offices. SB 56 creates the Indiana Department of Homeland Security, which will handle the duties and responsibilities of the State Emergency Management Agency, the Fire and Building Services Department, the Public Safety and Training Board, the Advanced Life Support Subcommittee and the Public Safety Institute. SB 335 creates the state Office of Tourism.

Senate Bill 467 would use proceeds from the sale of personalized license plates for license branch operations. SB 327 would begin the next general property reassessment in Indiana in 2009, rather than 2007.

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This Report can be accessed on the Internet at www.IN.gov/H68